Biblical Theology of Ezekiel

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INTRODUCTION

Historical Background

Much like modern times, turmoil filled the Middle East in the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries BC. The nation of Israel had lasted for more than one hundred years as a united monarchy under Saul, David, and Solomon (ca. 1043-931 BC), but the northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrians in 722 BC, and the Babylonian Empire threatened the existence of all nations in the area toward the end of the seventh century BC when the Babylonian king Nabopolassar defeated Nineveh in 612 BC.¹ Spiritually speaking, the northern kingdom of Israel was idolatrous from the very beginning when Jeroboam set up pagan altars at Dan and Bethel (1 Kgs 12:25-33). The southern kingdom of Judah had periods of faithfulness under certain kings like Asa, Uzziah, and Hezekiah, but many of the Judean kings were just as idolatrous as the kings of Israel (e.g., Manasseh [2 Kgs 21]). The nation of Judah experienced the LORD’s protection and deliverance from the Assyrians in 701 under Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18-19; Isa 36-37), and there was a time of spiritual revival under Josiah (ca. 640-609 BC) when the book of the Law was rediscovered in the temple. Josiah renewed the covenant and destroyed the Baal worship in the land (2 Kgs 22-23). Nevertheless, the LORD vowed to remove Judah from the land just as He had removed Israel because of the atrocities committed under Manasseh (2 Kgs 23:26-27; 24:3-4).

After Josiah’s untimely death in 609 BC in a battle with Pharaoh Neco at Megiddo (2 Kgs 23:29-30), his son, Jehoahaz (also called Shallum [Jer 22:11]) took the

thron in Jerusalem. Because he did evil in the eyes of the LORD, Jehoahaz was taken captive to Egypt by Neco and died in captivity after only three months on the throne (2 Kgs 23:31-34; Jer 22:10-12). Neco replaced Jehoahaz with another son of Josiah, Eliakim, and changed his name to Jehoiakim. Like his brother, Jehoiakim was a wicked king (2 Kgs 23:37), and he became a vassal first to Neco but then later to Nebuchadnezzar when the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC. In that same year, Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem and defeated it, taking some of the citizens as prisoners to Babylon along with the temple treasures (Dan 1:1-2). Jehoiakim remained publicly loyal to Nebuchadnezzar for three years before he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar in hopes of reestablishing Judean independence. The prophet Jeremiah warned Jehoiakim of God’s impending judgment, but Jehoiakim cut up and burned the scroll with Jeremiah’s prophecies (Jer 36). In 598 BC, Jerusalem rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kgs 24:1-4), Jehoiakim was killed (Jer 22:18-23; 36:30), and Jehoiakim’s son, Jehoiachin (also called Coniah and Jeconiah [Jer 22:24, 28; 1 Chr 3:16]), was placed on the throne.

Jehoiachin also did evil in the eyes of the LORD and only reigned for three months before he was deposed after seeking to rebel against Babylon with the help of Egypt (2 Kgs 24:7). Nebuchadnezzar deported ten thousand Jews to Babylon in 597 BC. This group was made up of Jehoiachin, his mother, queens, officials, fighting men,


craftsmen, and artisans (see 2 Kings 24:8-17). Mattaniah (renamed Zedekiah [2 Kgs 24:17]), another son of Josiah and uncle to Jehoiachin, was placed on the throne and reigned in Jerusalem for eleven years. In 589, Zedekiah joined an open revolt with Tyre, Ammon, and Edom against Babylon, and Nebuchadnezzar returned to finally destroy Jerusalem in 586 BC (2 Kgs 24:18-25:26; Jer 39:1-10). Zedekiah tried to flee, but he was captured and taken to Babylon in chains where he had his eyes gouged out after seeing his sons executed (2 Kgs 25:4-7; Jer 39:4-7; 52:9-11). Two months later, Nebuchadnezzar’s general, Nebuzaradan, burned Jerusalem and left only a few survivors (Jer 52:4-30). Nebuzaradan released Jeremiah from his chains (Jer 40:1-5), and Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah as governor of the pitiful remnant left in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 25:22). Gedaliah was murdered shortly after being appointed as governor (2 Kgs 25:23-25; Jer 41:1-10), and many fled from Jerusalem to Egypt for fear of the Babylonians (2 Kgs 25:26; Jer 41:16-43:13).

Ezekiel the Prophet

It was during this tumultuous time that Ezekiel ministered to the exiles in Babylon. Little is known about Ezekiel’s personal life. He is only mentioned twice in the

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4 Jeremiah prophesied that Jehoiachin and his mother would be handed over to Nebuchadnezzar and would die in another country (Jer 22:24-27). Jehoiachin and his mother were taken to Babylon in 597 BC, and after thirty-seven years in exile, Evil-Meroodach released Jehoiachin from prison in Babylon and allowed him to eat at the king’s table for the rest of his life in Babylon (2 Kgs 25:27-30; Jer 52:31-32).

5 The false prophet Hananiah predicted that within two years after Zedekiah took the throne, the yoke of Babylon would be broken, Jehoiachin and the captives would return from Babylon, and the temple treasures would be restored (Jer 28:1-4; 10-11). This reflects the Jewish expectations at that time that Zedekiah would usher in a new era of peace and prosperity (Lamar Eugene Cooper, Sr., Ezekiel, NAC, vol. 17 [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994], 22-23). Jeremiah opposed this message, and Hananiah died later that year according to the word of the LORD spoken through Jeremiah (Jer 28:5-9, 12-17). Cooper also notes that Ezekiel never recognized the legitimacy of Zedekiah’s reign since Ezekiel never refers to him as “king” (גֶּדֶל) and since Ezekiel dates his prophecies by the reign of Jehoiachin (Cooper, Ezekiel, 23n13).

6 Block, Ezekiel 1-24, 4.
book (1:3; 24:24; cf. 1 Chr 24:16), and his name means “God strengthens.” Ezekiel was taken captive to Babylon in 597 BC with Jehoiachin and the officials of Jerusalem at the age of twenty-five, which means that he was born in 623 BC and grew up during the time of Josiah’s reforms. Ezekiel was a priest and the son of Buzi (1:3), but he most likely did not minister at the temple in Jerusalem because he had not reached the age of thirty, when a priest would begin to minister (Num 4:3), before he was taken captive to Babylon. At the age of thirty, he was called to be a prophet (cf. 2:5; 33:33) while among the exiles by the Kebar River. His prophecies are well documented, and his ministry spanned over twenty-five years (597-571 BC). Thus, he was a prophet with a priestly background, as is evident from his knowledge of the temple and the system of worship (e.g., 40-42). Ezekiel was well acquainted with grief and personal tragedy, not only from the devastation of exile, but also from the loss of his own wife for whom he was forbidden to mourn (24:2, 15-18). Yet he experienced the glory of the LORD in a way that few others ever got to experience.

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7 Ezekiel dates the news of the fall of Jerusalem (586 BC) to “the twelfth year of our exile”, which would place the beginning of his exile at 597 BC (33:21). The age twenty-five comes from the opening phrase of Ezekiel, “the thirtieth year” (הָיָהּ הָעִמְדָהּ חַיָּה), which is commonly interpreted to refer to the age of Ezekiel when he was called to be a prophet (see Leslie C. Allen, Ezekiel 1-19, WBC [Dallas: Word, 1994], 20-21 for a discussion of the various proposals). If this is accurate, then Ezekiel was twenty-five years old when he was taken captive to Babylon since the call he received at the age of thirty came in the “fifth year of the exile” (1:3).

8 Cooper notes that the term “in the midst” (כָּנֵס) is used 116 times which is more than any other Old Testament writer. This signifies that Ezekiel identified himself with his fellow Jews in their plight as exiles in Babylon (Cooper, Ezekiel, 29).

9 The Kebar River (or “great canal”) is mentioned eight times in Ezekiel (1:1, 3; 3:15, 23; 10:15, 20, 22; 43:3) and is located about sixty miles southeast of Babylon (Daniel Bodi, “Ezekiel,” in Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, ed. John H. Walton, vol. 4 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009], 403-404).

10 Ezekiel’s prophecies are in chronological order with one exception. His second prophecy against Egypt (29:17-21) is the last prophecy recorded (571 BC) but is probably placed with the other prophecies against Egypt because of the common theme. For a chart of the dates of Ezekiel’s prophecies, see Ralph H. Alexander, “Ezekiel,” EBC, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 741; Cooper, Ezekiel, 54.
The Message of Ezekiel

The book of Ezekiel\(^\text{11}\) is a mixture of prophecies\(^\text{12}\) concerning judgment and restoration, much like the other prophets of the Old Testament. Hays has summarized the message of the prophets as follows: 1) You (Israel/Judah) have broken the covenant; you had better repent! 2) No repentance? Then judgment! Judgment will also come on the nations. 3) Yet there is hope beyond the judgment for a glorious future restoration both for Israel/Judah and for the nations.\(^\text{13}\) Most commentators recognize this pattern in Ezekiel and divide the book into three major sections: judgment on Judah (1-24), judgment on the nations (25-32), and restoration of the entire nation of Israel (33-48).\(^\text{14}\)

While the message of Isaiah focuses on the salvation of the Lord, the message of Jeremiah focuses on the judgment of the Lord, and the message of Daniel centers on the

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kingdom of the Lord, the chief concern of the book of Ezekiel is the glory of the Lord. Indeed, the opening vision of the book concerns the glory of the LORD (1:1-28), the pivotal section in the book concerns the vision of the departure of the glory of the LORD from the temple in Jerusalem (10:1-20), and the book concludes with the vision of the return of the glory of the LORD to the eschatological temple (43:1-15) and the restored city which is named “The LORD is There” (48:35). No one who heard Ezekiel’s messages could miss the centrality of the glory of the LORD.

However, Dillard makes a good point when he states, “The book of Ezekiel is of such length and richness that any effort to summarize its themes is inevitably reductionistic.” Instead of trying to tie all of Ezekiel’s messages into the concept of God’s glory, a more comprehensive approach is taken in this paper. From the standpoint of biblical theology, several key themes are displayed in the book of Ezekiel which are all related to the glory of the LORD in some sense. These include the transcendence of God, the holiness of God, the justice of God, and the restoration of God. The glory of the LORD displays the transcendence of God as seen in the vision of Ezekiel 1. The holiness of God is the reason why the glory of the LORD leaves the temple in Ezekiel 8-11. The justice of God demonstrates that the LORD was right to take His glory from the temple, and the redemption of God prepares the way for the glory of the LORD to return to Israel. It is the goal of this paper to examine these four themes and to summarize Ezekiel’s


16 All Scriptural quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

17 Dillard and Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 325. Dillard recognizes four major themes in Ezekiel: the holiness and transcendence of God, the grace and mercy of God, the sovereignty of God, and individual responsibility.
contribution to biblical theology. Finally, we will compare these themes with the teachings of the New Testament and look at Ezekiel canonically.

THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD

Ezekiel’s Vision of God’s Glory

The transcendence of God refers to His being “uniquely other than everything in creation.”¹⁸ In fact, “No other book of the Bible explores God’s absolute awesomeness and otherness in such lavish language.”¹⁹ When Ezekiel was by the Kebar River in 593 BC, “the hand of the LORD was upon him”²⁰ (1:3), and he saw a vision of God.²¹ The vision Ezekiel experienced included a windstorm, an immense cloud with flashing lightning, brilliant light, fire, glowing metal, four living creatures with four faces and four wings each, the loud sound of the creatures wings, an expanse of sparkling ice, a throne of sapphire, and a human-like figure in fiery, brilliant radiance like that of a rainbow (1:4-28). In short, Ezekiel saw fantastic, angelic beings,²² and he beheld the glory of the


²⁰ The phrase “hand of the [Sovereign] LORD” occurs seven times in Ezekiel (3:14, 22; 8:1; 33:22; 37:1; 40:1) and “suggests a state of divine possession in which the prophet received his supernatural revelation” (Cooper, Ezekiel, 60-61; cf. Daniel I. Block, “The Prophet of the Spirit: The Use of rwh in Ezekiel,” JETS 32, no. 1 [1989]: 33).

²¹ The term “vision” (יָדַע) does not appear in chapter 1, but in Ezekiel’s vision of the Jerusalem temple, he uses this term (8:4) and says that it was like his earlier vision in 3:22-23 which was like the vision he had seen in chapter one (see also 43:3). Additionally, the phrase “I looked and I saw” (1:4) is a standard introductory formula to visions in Ezekiel (1:15; 2:9; 8:2, 7; 10:1, 9; 37:8; 40:4-5; 44:4 [Alexander, “Ezekiel,” 757]).

²² The angelic beings in chapters one and ten have been the subject of much discussion in the commentaries (see Block, Ezekiel I-24, 61-71). Much of what Ezekiel sees is difficult to understand completely, like the four faces of the creatures or the “wheels” with rims full of eyes. Chisholm thinks that this is a classic example of contextualization whereby God accommodates Himself to the culture and mindset of the day (Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., Handbook on the Prophets [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002], 232).
LORD in a theophany (1:25-28). The indescribable character of the vision is apparent to all who try to discern what Ezekiel saw. Ezekiel was so blown away by the awesome, unfathomable glory of God that he immediately fell facedown before the LORD (1:28). After the vision, Ezekiel was so awestruck that he just sat among the exiles for seven days (3:15). Ezekiel’s visions of angelic beings and of the glory of the LORD (1-3; 8-11; 43) demonstrate that God Himself, the Creator of the heavenly beings and the one from whom the glory is manifested, is unlike any god or being on the earth.

God’s Omnipresence and Omniscience

The transcendence of God is also seen in his omnipresence and omniscience in the book of Ezekiel. Although the LORD manifests Himself with a physical presence on Mount Sinai (Exod 24:16-17), in the Tabernacle (Exod 40:34-35), in Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 8:30), the Lord also appeared to men who were in the presence of his glory in a theophany (a divine manifestation) in which God spoke. In these visions, the transcendent nature of God is expressed through his presence, his glory, and his action. In the case of Ezekiel, the vision was so overwhelming that he was unable to describe it properly. This is similar to the experience of Moses on Mount Sinai, where God’s presence was so intense that Moses was unable to see it directly (Exod 33:20).

Indeed, there are similar images from the ancient Near Eastern religions of deities and skybearing creatures (see Allen, Ezekiel 1-19, 26-31; Bodi, “Ezekiel,” 405-408). However, to state that God accommodates His self-revelation implies that the angelic beings and the images Ezekiel witnessed were not true to reality. By the same token, one could argue that if God appeared to a Christian living in the twenty-first century, then He would have appeared with something like fireworks and a nuclear explosion (lightning and brilliant lights). A better approach is to place the limitation on the prophet, not on God. God did not limit (contextualize) Himself to Ezekiel. Rather, Ezekiel’s physical descriptions of the angels and the glory of God are couched in the language and ideas of his own day. This does not mean that they are incorrect. Ezekiel, under the inspiration (hand) of the LORD, accurately recorded what he witnessed and used terms from his own time. It is interesting that these angelic creatures are identified as cherubim in 10:9-17, although the description there is slightly different than in chapter 1 (see Cooper, Ezekiel, 132-34). These creatures (or similar creatures because of the number of wings) also appear before the throne of God in Revelation 4:6-9 about seven centuries later. This indicates that the vision was not contextualized for Ezekiel since there are many similarities to the vision of heaven which John sees in Revelation 4.

23 It is important to observe that Ezekiel does not say that he saw the LORD, which would have resulted in immediate death (Exod 33:20; cf. John 1:18). He states that he saw “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.” This statement speaks more of what he did not see – namely, the LORD Himself (Gowan, Theology of the Prophetic Books, 129; Charles H. Dyer, “Ezekiel,” in The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1988], 1229).

24 Ezekiel also fell prostrate before the LORD when he encountered the glory of the LORD at other times (3:23; 43:3; 44:4) and when he petitioned the LORD for the lives of the Jews in Jerusalem (9:8; 11:13)

25 Ezekiel’s response is similar to Isaiah’s confession, “Woe to me…I am undone” when Isaiah encountered the glorious presence of the LORD (Isa 6:1-13).

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(1 Kgs 8:11), and in the eschatological temple (Eze 43:1-5), the vision of Ezekiel 1 signifies that the LORD’s presence and glory are not limited to the Jerusalem temple. He is free to move throughout the entire world, from Jerusalem to Babylon and beyond, and He is not limited to a physical location (cf. 1 Kgs 8:27). Additionally, the LORD’s omnipresence is related to His omniscience. Because the LORD is everywhere, He sees, hears, and knows all. The elders of Jerusalem were bowing down to idols in the Jerusalem temple, thinking that the darkness would cloak their evil deeds. They thought to themselves, “The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land” (8:12; 9:9). But the transcendent LORD was perfectly aware of their sins (cf. 11:5) as well as the sins of the nations (25:1-32:32). The LORD’s omniscience also demonstrates that He is transcendent over time and history. He is the God who predicts the downfall of Jerusalem (4-7, 13-17, 19-24), the downfall of nations (25-32), and the restoration of the nation of Israel (34-48).

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26 Hays, The Message of the Prophets, 201.

27 The prophecy concerning the destruction of Tyre (26:1-14) shows the remarkable foreknowledge of the LORD. The prophecy was progressively fulfilled by Nebuchadnezzar (26:4-11) and then later by Alexander the Great (26:12-14). This passage has been hotly debated because it appears to be an example of failed prophecy in that Nebuchadnezzar (26:7) destroyed the mainland of Tyre but could not conquer the island city (29:17-21). Critical scholars think that this is an example of dissonant prophecy whereby Ezekiel’s predictions failed (e.g., Dean Ulrich, “Dissonant Prophecy in Ezekiel 26 and 29,” BBR 10, no. 1 [2000]: 121-41). Some evangelicals think that this prophecy shows the conditional nature of prophecy or that God is free to cancel His own predictions if He so chooses (H. L. Ellison, Ezekiel: The Man and His Message [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956], 103-105; Daniel I. Block, The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 146-54; Kris J. Udd, “Prediction and Foreknowledge in Ezekiel’s Prophecy Against Tyre,” TynBul 56, no. 1 [2005]: 25-41; Robert B. Chisholm, “When Prophecy Appears to Fail, Check Your Hermeneutic,” JETS 53, no. 3 [Sept 2010]: 570-72). Others think that the prophecy was fulfilled exactly as predicted, albeit in stages (Feinberg, Ezekiel, 147-48; Ralph H. Alexander, Ezekiel [Chicago: Moody Press, 1976], 86-87; Gleason L. Archer, Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 276-78; Dyer, “Ezekiel,” 1279; Cooper, Ezekiel, 251-54).
**Titles for Ezekiel and for God**

A third way in which the transcendence of God is emphasized in the book of Ezekiel is in the titles used for Ezekiel and for God. Ezekiel is addressed as “son of man” ninety-three times in the book. This term likely means “person, human being” and emphasizes Ezekiel’s humanity and frailty compared to the holiness, glory, and power of the LORD and his angelic beings. Conversely, the term “Sovereign LORD” (יהוה) appears 217 times in the book. About half (122) of these preface the LORD’s oracles (“this is what the Sovereign LORD says”), and Ezekiel often addresses the LORD with this term (e.g., 4:14; 9:8; 11:13; 20:49; 37:3). The term “Sovereign LORD” only occurs 103 times outside Ezekiel, and this name “stresses both God’s sovereign authority and His covenant-keeping faithfulness.” Thus, Ezekiel is the lowly “son of man,” but God is the transcendent “Sovereign LORD.”

**THE HOLINESS OF GOD**

**God’s Holy Presence**

Another striking feature of the book of Ezekiel is the holiness of God which is related to the glory of the LORD. The glory of the LORD is the physical manifestation of God’s holy presence. The holiness of God is seen in the righteous judgments which the LORD proclaims against Jerusalem in chapter 4-24 of Ezekiel. To prove His point that the Jews had defiled His sanctuary with “vile images” and “detestable practices” (5:11),

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28 Dillard and Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 324. Dillard rightly notes that the term “son of man” in Ezekiel is not to be confused with Jesus’ self-designation found in the Gospels (e.g., Matt 26:24; Mark 8:38; Luke 7:34; John 3:13-14) which is derived from Daniel 7:13-14 where the “son of man” is a divine, messianic figure (cf. Mark 14:62).

29 The term “the LORD” by itself also appears about the same number of times (222) in the book.

the LORD takes Ezekiel on a tour of the temple in Jerusalem via a supernatural vision (8:1-11:25). The LORD shows Ezekiel four abominations which were taking place in the Jerusalem temple in real time. First, Ezekiel saw the “idol that provokes to jealousy”31 at the entrance to the north gate of the inner court (8:3). Second, Ezekiel is taken to the entrance of the court where he looks through a hole in the wall and sees all kinds of images and idols and seventy-two elders burning incense to the idols (8:7-11). Third, Ezekiel goes to the north gate of the temple where he sees women mourning for Tammuz, the Mesopotamian goddess of vegetation.32 Fourth, Ezekiel goes to the inner court of the temple and sees twenty-five men facing east with their backs toward the temple of the LORD, bowing down to the sun in the east (8:16). The LORD is infuriated by these profane acts, and He asks Ezekiel, “Is it a trivial matter for the house of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here?” (8:17; cf. 8:6). The LORD answers the question Himself when He removes His holy presence (glory) from His sanctuary. He is too holy to live in the midst of such sin and idolatry, and His holiness demands that wrath be poured out on the idolaters (7:1-8; 9:1-10; 14-16).

**God’s Holy Name**

The second way in which the holiness of God is displayed in the book of Ezekiel is in the LORD’s promise to vindicate His holy name in the earth.33 The LORD recounts how He had acted at various points in Israel’s history to keep His holy name from being profaned among the nations because of Israel’s idolatry (20:9, 14, 22; 43:7-8), but past a

31 For a discussion of the meaning of this phrase, see Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 281-82.


33 The name of God is equal to the character of God (Psa 9:10; 109:21), which includes reputation (Gowan, *Theology of the Prophetic Books*, 129).
certain point, the people were ripe for judgment (20:30-38). During the time of the exile, the nations said of Israel and of the LORD, “These are the LORD’s people, and yet they had to leave his land” (36:20). Israel made the LORD look bad and made His name a joke among the nations (25:6-7, 8). If Israel would not even serve her own God, then He must not be very powerful or worthy of worship. However, the LORD would vindicate His name and show Himself holy in Israel in the sight of the nations (20:41; 28:25; 36:23; 39:27). He would bring the people back to the land and purge out the rebels (20:38-40). The judgment upon the nations would also demonstrate that God is holy and does not tolerate sin (28:22; 38:16; 39:7). All peoples will “know that I am the LORD”, and the LORD will do all of this for His own sake (36:32).

God’s Holy Worship

Finally, the holiness of the LORD is seen in the system of worship described in Ezekiel temple vision in chapters 40-48 when the glory of God returns to the temple (43:1-5). The LORD declares that the nations will know that He makes Israel holy when His sanctuary is among them forever (37:28). In order for His sanctuary to be among His people, though, the LORD promises that there will be an eschatological temple. All of the surrounding land on top of the mountain in Jerusalem will be most holy (43:12). There will be a section of land which will be set apart for the LORD and will contain the sanctuary with “the Most Holy Place” and a residential zone for the priests (45:1-5; 34).
48:11-12 cf. 41:4, 21, 23). There will be a restored Zadokian priesthood to minister at the new temple (40:46; 43:19; 44:15-16; 48:11; cf. Num 25:10-13; 1 Kgs 1:32-40; Jer 33:17-22) as well as a special “prince” to provide offerings for the nation (45:16-17). The priests will teach the people the difference between what is holy and common and between what is clean and unclean (44:23). They will also serve as judges in disputes and will teach the people the laws and decrees of the LORD. The sacrificial system of worship will be reinstituted, and certain feasts will be celebrated (43:13-27; 45:13-25). These holy conditions are necessary for the glory of the LORD to return.

THE JUSTICE OF GOD

The People’s Sinfulness

The messages of judgment in the book of Ezekiel show that the LORD is perfectly just in removing His glory from Jerusalem and in bringing destruction upon Judah and upon the nations. He did nothing without just cause (14:23). When the LORD commissioned Ezekiel, He warned him that his messages would not produce good results (cf. Isa 6:9-10). Ezekiel will encounter a rebellious people (2:3, 5, 6, 7, 8; cf. 3:9, 26-27; 35). The term “prince” is used 15 times in Ezekiel 44-47, as well as in 34:24 and 37:25. One of the difficulties with Ezekiel’s vision in chapters 40-48 is determining the identity of this prince. In chapter 34, God tells Ezekiel that in the future restoration of Israel He will rid the land of the wicked shepherds who do not care for the flock (34:1-10). The Lord Himself declares that He will search for the sheep and gather them together from the countries where they have been scattered (34:11-19). He will also appoint over the nation a single shepherd, “My servant David,” who will be “prince among them” (34:24). At first glance, this appears to be a reference to the Messiah in conjunction with other similar Old Testament prophecies of a Davidic ruler (2 Sam 7:12-16; Isa 11:1-16; 16:5; Jer 23:5-6; 30:9; 33:17-26; Hos 3:5). In addition, God promises to reunite the divided nation into one kingdom (37:15-23) under one Davidic “king” who will be their “prince” forever (37:24-28). There is no problem with interpreting these passages as Messianic, but the “prince” in Ezekiel 40-48 cannot refer to the Messiah because he offers sacrifices for his own sins (45:22) and fathers his own offspring (46:16-18). What is more, this “prince” does not perform the priestly duties (45:19) like the Messiah will (Psa 110:4; Zech 6:12-13), and he must worship the Lord as others do (46:2). Another reason why this prince is to be distinguished from the Messiah is because there is at least one reference to “princes” who will give rest to the land of the house of Israel according to their tribes (45:8), suggesting that these might be tribal leaders (John F. MacArthur, The MacArthur Study Bible [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997], 1218).

35 For a discussion of Ezekiel 40-48 and the millennial sacrifices, see below.
12:2-3, 9, 25; 17:12; 24:3; 44:6) who are obstinate and stubborn (2:4). They will threaten the prophet like briers, thorns, and scorpions (2:6), but he must speak to them anyway, whether they accept the message or not (2:7; 3:11). If the LORD had sent Ezekiel to foreigners, they surely would have listened to his message (3:6). Although the people would reject Ezekiel’s messages from the LORD, the LORD assures Ezekiel that they are rejecting the LORD Himself when they reject the prophet (3:7).

Ezekiel performed symbolic acts (4:1-5:16; 12:1-8), preached messages of doom and destruction (6:1-7:27; 20:1-29, 45-48; 21:1-32; 22:1-31; 24:1-14), and used vivid allegories to address the idolatry of the people (15:1-8; 16:1-58; 17:1-24; 23:1-49), but the Jews in exile continued to show their spiritual obtuseness. After Ezekiel witnessed firsthand the abominations in the temple (8:1-11:24) and recounted the details of his vision to the exiles (11:25), the people were still uttering a proverb in the land that said, “The days go by and every vision comes to nothing” (12:22). In other words, they did not believe Ezekiel’s messages. Then, the people began saying, “The vision he sees is for many years from now, and he prophesies about the distant future” (12:27). They recognized that judgment would come, but they refused to consider themselves among the guilty parties. The LORD assured the people that His words would not be delayed any longer (12:28).

37 The Hebrew idiom is literally “hard of face” (יֵּפְּנֵד יָבִי) and refers to the people’s stubborn will (Cooper, Ezekiel, 76).

38 Allen notes that thorns are a common metaphor for hostility (Eze 28:24; Mic 7:4; Allen, Ezekiel I-19, 40).

39 Block states that this proverb reflects the “growing popular cynicism toward doomsayers and doomsayings” (Block, Ezekiel I-24, 387-88).
After Ezekiel condemned the false prophets and prophetesses for proclaiming peace when there was no peace and for leading the people into sin (13:1-23), the elders of Israel came to Ezekiel to inquire of the LORD. However, the LORD refused to accept them because they had set up “idols in their hearts” and put stumbling block “before their faces” (14:1-4). The LORD asks Ezekiel, “Should I let them inquire of me at all?” The obvious answer is, “No.” What this teaches is that the LORD sees the sinfulness of the heart, and He will not answer the questions or prayers of an idolater. Instead, the LORD will set His face against the idolater and will cut him off from the people (14:7-8). About a year later (cp. 8:1 and 20:1), some of the elders came to Ezekiel again to inquire of the LORD, but the LORD refused to accept them because of their idolatry (20:2-30, 39-48) and abominable child sacrifices (20:31). This time, the people said of Ezekiel, “Isn’t he just telling parables?” (20:49). Clearly, the people were spiritually dull and refused to acknowledge their idolatry and rebellion. God was just in punishing them.

**Individual Responsibility**

One of the key themes in the judgments of the LORD through Ezekiel is the idea of individual responsibility which underlies the justice of God. This concept is first seen in Ezekiel’s commission in chapter 3. The LORD tells Ezekiel that he is function as a watchman for the house of Israel. The wicked must be warned to turn from their sins, and the righteous must be warned not to turn from their righteousness (3:17-20; cf. 33:1-20). Ezekiel’s responsibility was to warn the people as God’s prophet. Thus, each individual (the prophet, the righteous, and the wicked) is accountable before God for his actions. The concept of individual responsibility is also seen in Ezekiel’s vision of the Jerusalem

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40 The false prophetesses were acting in the opposite manner of Ezekiel, the watchman, because they were encouraging people not to turn from their evil ways (13:22)!
temple in chapters 8-11. The LORD singles out those who were idolatrous, even naming some of the wicked leaders (8:11; 11:1-2, 13), but He also orders His angel to place a mark on the foreheads of those who were grieving over the idolatry in the temple (9:4). The mark would protect the righteous who had lamented over the abominations in Jerusalem (9:6). This recalls the story of the Passover when the death angel passed over those houses which were marked with blood (Exod 12:1-13, 29-30), and it shows that the righteous individuals would not be judged along with the wicked.

Individual responsibility is also expressed in Ezekiel’s message of judgment in 14:12-23. In this prophecy, the LORD states that if a country sins against the LORD by being unfaithful (i.e., Judah) and is judged, the righteousness of any of its citizens would only save the righteous one themselves. The righteousness of men such as Noah, Daniel, and Job would only be applied to those men, but the wicked would suffer for their own sins (14:13-14). Indeed, these three men could not even save their own children. They alone would be spared (14:15-20). At the end of this message, the LORD

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41 Some scholars think that Ezekiel refers to Dan’el, a mythical hero from the Ugaritic texts of the Canaanite religion. In support of this view, it is often pointed out that the Hebrew spelling of Dan’el in Ezekiel (14:14, 20; 28:3) is יָדֵן and thus differs from the spelling in the book of Daniel (דניאֵל) which has a yod. It is also claimed that the pagan figure Dan’el makes for a better comparison with the king of Tyre in 28:3. In Ezekiel 14, the wicked are being described as worse than three noble Gentiles: Noah, Dan’el, and Job (see Bodi, “Ezekiel,” 434). Another argument in favor of Dan’el over Daniel is that Noah and Job are ancient wise men, unlike Daniel who was a contemporary of Ezekiel (Steven Tuell, Ezekiel, New International Biblical Commentary, eds. Robert L. Hubbard Jr. and Robert K. Johnston [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009], 83-84). However, Block offers a convincing rebuttal to the proposal that Ezekiel is referring to a Canaanite hero (Block, Ezekiel 1-24, 448-50). First, he notes that the alternate spelling of דַּנְיֵל is attested in the Mari Letters. Second, he states that the common feature among Noah, Daniel, and Job is that they worshipped the same God (Yahweh). Third, the Dan’el of the Canaanite tales is a pagan idolater and is much more similar to Ezekiel’s audience than to Noah and Job. Fourth, the Daniel of the Bible would have been a well-known figure in Babylon because of his wisdom and righteousness (Dan 1:17-21; 2:24, 48; 5:12 [Cooper, Ezekiel, 163]). As to the order of Noah, Daniel, and Job, Feinberg suggests that they may form a climax which fits the context in that Noah saved his family, Daniel saved his friends, but Job could not save his children (Feinberg, Ezekiel, 81).
states that He does nothing without just cause (14:25). He is perfectly just in His judgments.

Finally, individual responsibility is most clearly seen in Ezekiel 18:1-32. The exiles had been quoting a common proverb which seemed to impugn the LORD’s justice: “The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge?” (18:2; cf. Jer 31:29). The people were complaining that they were being judged for the sins of their fathers, but the LORD responds by stating that “the soul who sins is the one who will die” (18:4, 20). Then, He gives several case studies to prove illustrate His point (18:5-29). 1) If a righteous man has a wicked son who performs the evil deeds which his father shuns, then the son will be put to death; his blood will be on his own head. 2) If the wicked son has a son of his own who learns from his father’s ways and lives righteously, then that righteous son will not die for his father’s sin; he will surely live. 3) If a wicked man turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, then he will live. 4) If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits the same sins as the wicked man, then he will die for his sins. The LORD’s justice is evident when He states, “The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him” (18:20). But the people still charged God with

42 The teaching of individual responsibility in Ezekiel does not contradict the other biblical teachings about corporate solidarity (e.g., Exod 20:5; 34:7; Num 14:18; see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Toward Old Testament Ethics [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983], 67-72) or examples of children dying for the sins of their parents (e.g., Num 16:27, 32; Josh 7:24; 2 Sam 12:5-6, 10; 21:1-9, 14). Both individual responsibility and corporate solidarity can be held in balance (Chisholm, Handbook on the Prophets, 254-55). As Cooper states, “[Ezekiel’s] message helped to demonstrate the difference between guilt for sin and consequences of sin. We are guilty before God and accountable to him for our own sins. But the consequences of our sins are more far-reaching and will affect others for generations to come (Exod 34:6-7)” (Cooper, Ezekiel, 43). Thus, we are judged individually for our sins, though we may at times experience the consequences of the sins of others. The principle of Exodus 20:5 also reflects the truth that children
being unjust (18:25, 29). The LORD responds by saying, “Is it not your ways that are unjust?”

**Repentance Desired**

A discussion of the justice of God in the book of Ezekiel would be incomplete without mentioning the LORD’s desire for Israel to repent. This is seen first in the fact that God raised up a prophet to deliver His word to the people (cf. Deut 18:15-19). If God had truly forsaken His covenant people, then He would not have cared to send a prophet to the Jewish exiles. The fact that he sent a prophet means that he desired repentance. This was the LORD’s message to Ezekiel when he was commissioned: “Whoever will listen let him listen, and whoever will refuse let him refuse…” (3:27). Clearly, God sent the prophet in hopes that people would listen even though He knew that they were a stubborn and rebellious people. Second, the LORD commands the people to repent (זְמַע) and turn from their evil ways (14:5; 18:20, 32). The command for repentance assumes that there is still hope for the people of God. Third, the LORD states without hesitation that He is unhappy with those who persist in wickedness: “Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?” (18:23, cf. 18:32; 33:11). In summary, the book of Ezekiel teaches that God is just in all of His ways and that He was just to judge His people and to remove His glory from the Jerusalem temple.

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often repeat the sins of their parents (Feinberg, *Ezekiel*, 100). Ezekiel confronts this problem head-on with his case studies because even the children of wicked parents can repent and forge a new path.
THE RESTORATION OF GOD

The bad news of judgment would be incomplete without the glorious promises of hope and restoration in the latter part of the book of Ezekiel. On the evening before the news of the fall of Jerusalem reached Ezekiel and the exiles (33:21-22), the LORD prepared His people for the horrific news that Jerusalem had been destroyed by sending to Ezekiel a series of oracles that would remind the exiles that God is faithful to keep His promises. This included the promises of a new shepherd for the people and an everlasting covenant of peace. In the final vision of the book (40-48), Ezekiel sees the restored temple and worship system. The glory that Ezekiel experienced in chapter one had departed from the temple, but at a future time, the glory of the LORD would return to Jerusalem under the right conditions.

A New Shepherd

The promise of a new shepherd in Ezekiel 34 begins with the LORD’s declaration that He will remove the wicked shepherds (kings) who had plundered and eaten His sheep (34:1-10). The LORD Himself will search for His sheep as a shepherd looks for His scattered sheep, and He will bring them back to their own land and tend to the sheep Himself, shepherding them with justice (34:11-16). Then, the LORD declares that He will place as one shepherd over His people “my servant David.” The LORD will be their

43 It should be pointed out that there are some messages of hope and restoration in the judgment sections of chapters 1-24 and 25-32 (11:16-21; 14:11; 16:60-63; 17:22-24; 20:33-44; 21:27; 28:25-26; 29:21), and there are some messages of judgment/warning in the restoration section of chapters 33-48 (33:23-33; 34:1-10; 35:1-15; 43:10-11; 44:5-12; 45:9).


45 Cooper calls chapter 34 a “sequel” to chapter 22 and notes that kings were often called “shepherds” in the ancient Near East (see Isa 44:28; Jer 2:8; 10:21; 23:1-6; 25:34-38; Mic 5:4-5; Zech 11:4-17 [Cooper, Ezekiel, 298]). Craigie draws attention to the parallels in the LORD’s shepherd-role in Psalm 23 (Peter C. Craigie, Ezekiel [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983], 243).
God, and “David” will be “prince” (אָ Readonly)) among them (34:23-24). Most commentators see this as a reference to Jesus Christ, the Davidic Messiah who fulfills the promise of an eternal throne to the house of David (2 Sam 7:16). He will be both king and shepherd over God’s people (37:24; 34:23), and there will be one shepherd in the land. The significance of the new shepherd is that the nation will finally have a righteous king who

46 See Block’s discussion of this term in Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 299-300.

47 There may be two other references to the Messiah in Ezekiel 17:22-24 and in 29:21. In Ezekiel 17:22-24, the LORD states,

“I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. All the trees of the field will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.”

Though couched in figurative language, this passage teaches that the LORD will plant his own ruler in the land, and the people will experience a time of great prosperity under this ruler. This can be none other than the Davidic “branch” mentioned elsewhere in Scripture (Isa 4:2; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 3:8; 6:12 [Feinberg, *Ezekiel*, 97-98; Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 182-84]).

The second reference comes at the end of the prophecy against Egypt (29:21). The LORD states, “On that day I will make a horn grow for the house of Israel, and I will open your mouth among them. Then they will know that I am the LORD.” Alexander thinks that this is not a messianic promise because there was no “horn” (ruler) from Israel during the time of Egypt’s destruction (Alexander, “Ezekiel,” 893). Cooper defends the messianic view by stating that the term “to grow” (נָתַק) is a messianic term used in several key texts (Jer 23:5; Isa 4:2; Zech 3:8). In context, this verse means that Egypt’s subjugation by Nebuchadnezzar would be a foretaste of the coming of the Messiah, when all of God’s enemies would be removed. When the prophecy came true, then Ezekiel would be allowed to open his mouth and speak freely (Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 275-76).

48 Feinberg, *Ezekiel*, 198-99; Alexander, “Ezekiel,” 914; Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 302-303; Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 297-301; Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 277. However, some dispensationalists think that “David” here and in 37:24-25 refers to the resurrected King David, not to the Messiah (e.g., Dyer, “Ezekiel,” 1295). The main argument for this view is that David is called “prince” (34:24; 37:25), and the “prince” is later identified as the temple leader in the millennial kingdom who still makes sin offerings for himself (45:22; 46:4). These actions would not be appropriate for the Son of God, but they are fitting for King David. The other references to an eschatological “David” (Hos 3:5; Jer 23:5; 30:9) also refer to the literal David in this view. Against this view is the fact that “David” is also called “king” in 37:24. In addition, the term “raise up” in 32:23 is from the hiphil of נָתַק and refers to appointment rather than to resurrection (Randall Price, “Ezekiel,” in *The Popular Bible Prophecy Commentary*, eds. Tim LaHaye and Ed Hindson [Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2006], 178).

49 Since the LORD had already declared that He Himself would shepherd His flock (34:11-16), it is striking that there will be just one shepherd in the land since the LORD would also appoint “my servant David” as the one shepherd over His people (34:23). Is the shepherd going to be the servant or the LORD? This passage implies that there is some overlap between the LORD and the Davidic prince.
will lead the people to live righteously before the LORD. Under such leadership, the
pride of the LORD would never abandon the temple again.

An Everlasting Covenant of Peace

The promise of an everlasting covenant first appears at the end of Ezekiel’s
allegory of unfaithful Jerusalem (16:59-63). Although the Jews had been unfaithful and
had broken their covenant with the LORD, He promises to remember the covenant He
had made with Israel in the days of her youth. The LORD promises to establish an
“everlasting covenant” with Judah (16:60, 62) and to make atonement for the sins
previously committed. This speaks of the tremendous mercy of the LORD, for after
describing in great detail how Judah had acted like a prostitute, the LORD declares that
He will atone for her sins. The LORD later promises to make a “covenant of peace” with
the house of Israel (34:25-31; 37:26), and He invokes the covenantal language of “I will
be their God, and they will be my people” (37:27; cf. 34:31). Although the term “new
covenant” (Jer 31:31) is not used, the terms “everlasting covenant” and “covenant of
peace” connote the same idea communicated elsewhere in Scripture (Hos 2:18; Isa 42:6;
49:8; 54:10; 55:3; 59:21; 61:8; Jer 31:31-34; 32:40; 50:5).

With the everlasting covenant comes the promise of the return to the land (34:13-
16; 36:1-12, 24, 35; 37:11-14, 21; cf. 11:17; 20:33-38; 28:25-26) as a fulfillment of the
promise given to Abraham (Gen 12:7; 13:15, 17; 15:7, 18; 17:8) and as a fulfillment of
the prediction of restoration in the Mosaic Covenant (Deut 30:1-10). There will be an

50 The covenant referred to here is most likely the Abrahamic covenant (see Block, Ezekiel 1-24,
516-17).

51 Cooper notes that the regathering of Israel from “all” the countries where they have been
dispersed suggests an eschatological setting which does not suit the return from Babylon. This prophecy
unprecedented level of productivity in the land (34:14, 26-27; 36:8, 34) such that the Jews would no longer be the victims of famine (34:29; 36:29-30). The LORD will rid the land of wild beasts that might threaten the productivity and the lives of the children of the land (34:25, 28; cf. 5:17; 14:15, 21; 33:27). There will be a population explosion among God’s people, and the towns and ruins will be rebuilt (36:8-12, 33-38). On the same day when the towns are resettled (36:33), the nation of Israel will experience spiritual cleansing (36:25, 33; 37:23; cf. 24:13) and receive a new heart and new spirit (36:26; cf. 18:31). The old heart of stone will be replaced with a heart of flesh (36:26; cf. 11:19; 44:7, 9), and the LORD will place His Spirit in the people to enable them to obey His decrees (36:27; 34:17; 39:29). Finally, the northern kingdom of Israel would be rejoined to the southern kingdom of Judah to form one nation again (37:11, 15-23), and the nation of Israel would no longer fear the threats of their contemporary enemies (35:1-15; 36:1-7) or their eschatological enemies (38:1-39:24).

must refer to the regathering after the dispersion in AD 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed (Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 316). Price also states that physical restoration to the land precedes spiritual restoration. In the vision of the valley of dry bones (37:1-14), the bones, tendons, flesh, and skin come together first before the breath comes into the bones to make them alive. This means that Israel may experience regathering as a physical nation before experiencing spiritual rebirth, as is evident in the modern state of Israel (see Price, “Ezekiel,” 183-86).

The beasts here may be literal or figurative (see Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48*, WBC [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990], 163).

Price states that the “new heart” is the volitional aspect of regeneration, and the “new spirit” is the relational aspect. The “heart of stone” pictures a hardened will which will be replaced by a sensitive, responsive “heart of flesh” (ibid., 183-84). The fulfillment of this promise is not in Christian conversion but in the spiritual rebirth of the nation of Israel (Rom 11:25-33), although Christian conversion uses similar terminology (e.g., Eph 1:13).

Block points out that the term “one” (יְנֵה) occurs eleven times in Ezekiel 37:15-24 (Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 297n139). Cooper carefully articulates that the vision of Ezekiel 37 primarily depicts the national restoration of Israel, but the concept of a personal resurrection after death is not absent from this passage either (Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 319-22; see also Daniel I. Block, “Beyond the Grave: Ezekiel’s Vision of Death and Afterlife,” *BBR* 2 [1992]: 113-41).
The prophecies against Edom and against the mountains in Ezekiel 35-36 amount to “paying back old debts” (Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 278). The Edomites had gloated over the destruction of Israel and Judah and desired to take the land as their possession even though the LORD was there (35:10), but the LORD had heard all of the taunts that they had made against Israel (35:12-13). The LORD would repay them for their anger, hatred, bloodshed, jealousy, and boasting. The same punishment would be inflicted upon Israel’s other enemies who had gloated over her destruction (36:1-7). No longer would the Israelites be threatened or bothered with the taunts from the surrounding nations (36:15).

The infamous prophecy of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38-39 is one of the most difficult passages in the Bible to interpret. A careful reading of the passage reveals the following points. 1) The prophecy concerns an invasion of the land of Israel from the far north (38:6, 15; 39:2). The key players include a leader named “Gog”, of the land of “Magog”, and seven nations: Meshech, Tubal, Persia, Cush, Put, Gomer, and Beth Togarmah. 2) The invasion will occur at future time (38:8, 10, 14, 16; 39:8, 11, 13, 22) when Israel has “recovered from war” and has been “gathered from many nations to the mountains of Israel, which had been desolate” (38:8, 12). This will occur at a time when the Jews are living safely in a land of unwalled villages. They will be living peacefully and unsuspectingly without gates and bars (38:8, 11, 14). The purpose of the invasion will be to loot the unprotected Israelites (38:12-13). 3) The LORD Himself will bring these nations against Israel because He is against Gog (38:3-4, 8, 16; 39:2). 4) The coalition of nations will advance against Israel like a cloud covering the land (38:9, 15), but Gog and the nations will suffer defeat (38:18). There will be a great earthquake (38:19-20), the mountains will be overturned (38:20), and there will be fighting amongst the coalition (38:21). There will be a plague, bloodshed, rain, hailstones, and burning sulfur (38:22). The birds and wild animals will gorge themselves on the carcasses (39:4, 17-20), and fire will consume Magog and those living in the coastlands (39:6). The weapons will be used as fuel for a period of seven years (39:9-11), Gog will receive a burial plot in Israel (39:11-12), and it will take seven months to bury the dead and cleanse the land (39:12-16). 5) Through Gog’s defeat, the LORD will display His holiness, greatness, and glory among the nations (38:16, 23; 39:7, 13, 21). From that day forward, Israel will know that the LORD is God, and the nations will know that the people of Israel went into exile for their sins (39:22-24).

The meaning of the text is fairly plain, but identifying its fulfillment is puzzling. Clearly, this invasion and battle has never taken place historically. One of the major questions is, “When will this prophecy be fulfilled?” The invasion appears to be at a time when Israel is restored to the land and is living in peace and security. The timing options include the following: before the Rapture, after the Rapture, midway through the Tribulation, at the return of Christ, at the beginning of the Millennium, at the end of the Millennium (see Ralph H. Alexander, “A Fresh Look at Ezekiel 38 and 39,” *JETS* 17 [Summer 1974]: 157-69). The identity of Gog, Magog, and the nations is also a debated point (see Feinberg, *Ezekiel*, 219-21; Alexander, “Ezekiel,” 929-30; Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 331; Block, *Ezekiel* 25-48, 433-42; Price, “Ezekiel,” 190-91). Another important consideration is that the book of Revelation mentions the phrase “Gog and Magog” in reference to the battle led by Satan following the millennium (Rev 20:8). Does this mean that the Ezekiel 38-39 is fulfilled in Revelation 20:8, or is the language of “Gog and Magog” being invoked stereotypically?

One view is that the prophecy is contextualized for Ezekiel’s audience and that Gog and the nations represent the archetypal enemies of God who fight in one final battle. Thus, Ezekiel 38-39 is the same as the final battle of Revelation 20:8 (Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 282-83). Another view is that Gog is a code word for Babylon, the only nation not mentioned in the judgment oracles of Ezekiel 25-32, and that the battle of Ezekiel 38-39 will take place at the end of the Tribulation and will resume at the end of the millennium (Alexander, “Ezekiel,” 937-40; Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 331-37). Against the view that Ezekiel 38-39 is the same battle as Revelation 20:8 is the number of differences in the accounts. For example, the invasion of Ezekiel 38-39 comes from the north (39:2), but the invasion of Revelation 20 comes from the four corners of the earth (20:8; cf. 7:1). Also, when Gog and the enemy nations are killed, it takes seven months to bury the bodies and seven years to burn the weapons as fuel (Eze 39:9-16). But in Revelation, fire falls from heaven and instantly consumes the enemies (Rev 20:9), and there is no burial process (for other differences, see Price, “Ezekiel,” 192).

The view of this author is that Gog will lead a coalition of northern nations against Israel either in the near future (or after the Rapture) or shortly after the return of Christ (for the identity of these nations,
A Restored Temple

The final vision of the book of Ezekiel completes the picture of restoration by describing exactly how the LORD will put His sanctuary among His people once again. Interpreting Ezekiel 40-48, though, has been controversial for scholars both ancient and modern.57 The ancient Jews believed that the difficulties in Ezekiel would be explained when Elijah came (Mal. 4:5).58 What is apparent to all interpreters is that Ezekiel’s temple was never built, the Zadokian priesthood was never established, and the land was never redistributed. In modern times, there have been three basic approaches to interpreting Ezekiel 40-48: the vision failed, the vision is figurative, or the vision is yet to be fulfilled in the future.

First, some scholars think that Ezekiel’s prophecy failed. Ezekiel presents an ideal temple which should have been built after the return from exile. The fact that the temple was never built represents a failure on the part of Ezekiel and on the part of the Jewish people.59 The problem with this view is that it makes the prophecy nothing more than

57 Some ancient Jewish scholars objected to canonizing Ezekiel because of the discrepancies between Ezekiel’s temple and the Law of Moses, such as the differences in the number and kinds of animals for the sacrifices (e.g., Num 28:11 and Eze 46:6). One rabbinic tradition tells how Hanahiah ben Hezekiah shut himself in his upper chamber with three hundred jars of oil and worked to reconcile the differences with the Torah so that Ezekiel would not be discarded. Although the book of Ezekiel remained in the canon, the temple vision was only permitted to be read by those who were age thirty or older (Joseph Blenkinsopp, Ezekiel, Interpretation [Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990], 195).

wishful thinking, and it makes Ezekiel a false prophet (Deut 18:21-22). Furthermore, the historical view does not fit the eschatological context of chapters 36-39. Finally, if Ezekiel presented an ideal temple, then why is there no mention of it among post-exilic Jews?

Second, some scholars think that Ezekiel’s temple vision describes the spiritual reality of God’s presence in concrete terms familiar to Ezekiel and his audience. Often, scholars who hold to some form of replacement theology, whereby the church replaces Israel in the program of God, take a non-literal view of Ezekiel 40-48. It is argued that since Ezekiel 40-48 is a vision, then it must be understood symbolically or apocalyptically. Also, the river described in 47:1-12 appears to go beyond a literal understanding. A third problem is that the physical dimensions of the temple require a geographic miracle if taken literally. Because of these perceived problems with the literal interpretation, the fulfillment must take place spiritually in the church age where believers are the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:19), in the person of Christ who is

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65 Ellison, *Ezekiel*, 140.

“God with us” (cp. Matt 1:23 with Eze 48:35), in the new creation (cp. Eze 47:1-12 with Rev 22:1), or in all three. The land redistribution may be typological of the New Jerusalem or the new earth which believers of all ages inherit.

There are several arguments against the figurative (spiritual) interpretations. First, if one abandons grammatical-historical hermeneutics in favor of a figurative or spiritual approach, then subjective interpretation will take over. As Alexander states, “Who can dispute the results of ‘spiritual’ interpretation, for the student, himself, is always the authority?” Second, the vivid detail in Ezekiel’s description of the temple, sacrifices, and land make it difficult to find spiritual meanings. Third, since the glory departed from the literal temple in chapter 10, then the return of the glory to a literal, eschatological temple is fitting. Fourth, the land boundaries in Ezekiel’s vision are the same as descriptions given before the Conquest (Num 34) and after the Conquest (Joshua 15-19). This points toward a literal redistribution of the land. Fifth, while there are similarities between Ezekiel 40-48 and the new heavens and new earth of Revelation 21-22, there are also marked differences.

69 Alexander, Ezekiel, 129.
71 Most important is the fact that there is no temple in the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:22). It would be strange to describe the eschatological state in temple terms when no such temple will be there. Additionally, while both temples have a river, Ezekiel’s river flows eastward from the threshold of the temple (Eze 47:1), but the river in Revelation flows from the throne of God and the Lamb (Rev 22:1). Another difference is that in eternity there will be no more curse (Rev 22:3), but Ezekiel’s temple contains
A third approach, taken by the author, is that Ezekiel’s vision is to be understood literally and will be fulfilled in the millennial kingdom of Christ. Several arguments support the literal interpretation. First, this view fits the eschatological context of Ezekiel 34-48 and follows the rebirth and spiritual conversion of the nation described in chapters 34, 36-37. Second, this view fits the greater context of the book of Ezekiel. Since the glory departed from a literal temple, then it makes sense that the glory will return to a literal temple. Third, this view employs consistent, historical-grammatical hermeneutics and eliminates much subjectivity in interpretation. Fourth, the fact that the millennial sacrificial system is markedly different than the Aaronic system also argues for its literal interpretation. Ezekiel’s temple is not simply a reinstitution of the Old Covenant. Fifth, the same truth about a future temple and sacrifices appears elsewhere throughout other prophets.

There are two major objections to the literal view. First, it is claimed that the land of Jerusalem will not be able to accommodate a literal fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision. All four sides of the temple are measured at 4,500 cubits, adding up to a perimeter of 18,000 sacrifices for sins. Finally, in Ezekiel’s temple the city and the temple are distinct (Eze 48:8, 15), but in Revelation there is only the New Jerusalem.


There will be no ark of the covenant, no tables of the Law, no cherubim, no mercy seat, no veil, no golden lamp stand, and no table of showbread. There is a “prince” who has some priestly responsibility (see n35), but there is no high priest or king in Ezekiel’s temple. What is more, the Levites have fewer privileges, except for the sons of Zadok. There is no feast of Pentecost, no Day of Atonement, and no evening sacrifice.

cubits or about 6 miles around (48:30). The millennial temple would be larger than the entire ancient walled city of Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{75} The millennial Jerusalem would be about 40 miles in circumference.\textsuperscript{76} The temple is set on a very high mountain (40:2), though no such mountain exists in Jerusalem. However, these difficulties are not insurmountable. Several Old Testament prophecies speak of geological changes that will occur in Palestine when Christ returns, thereby opening up the possibility that the 2,500-square-mile area for the temple and city will fit into the reshaped land (Isa 26:15; 33:17; 54:2; Zech 14:4-10). There will be new rivers and new valleys, and the entire Dead Sea region will be lifted up more than 1300 feet in order to have fish (Eze 47:10). Revelation 16:20 states that there will be giant earthquakes which will cause islands and mountains to vanish towards the end of the Tribulation.

The second major objection concerns the nature and function of the millennial sacrifices which seems to run counter to the work of Christ and the teaching of the New Testament that Christ died once for all (e.g., Heb 9:11-15; 10:1-4, 18).\textsuperscript{77} Even some dispensationalists who otherwise interpret Ezekiel 40-48 literally see the sacrifices as a contextualized part of the prophecy which will not find literal fulfillment in the millennium.\textsuperscript{78} In response, it must first be stated that all Christians agree that the work of Christ has brought an end to sacrifices for the church. Second, the Old Testament

\textsuperscript{75} The temple must be big enough to accommodate the large number of worshipers and priests (Isa 2:3; 60:14; 61:6; Zech 8:20-23).

\textsuperscript{76} Whitcomb, “Millennial Temple,” 230.

\textsuperscript{77} See O. T. Allis, Prophecy and the Church (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 246-47.

sacrifices never had any redemptive efficacy to begin with (Heb 10:4). So how do dispensationalists deal with the problem of millennial sacrifices? One view is that the millennial sacrifices will have a memorial function much like communion for the church today.79 Christians are to take communion in order to proclaim the Lord’s death “until He comes” (1 Cor 11:25-26). This implies that when Jesus returns, Christians will no longer celebrate communion and will need another ritual for remembrance. The millennial sacrifices may also serve as a reminder of man’s sinfulness and need of redemption.80 A second view is that the millennial sacrifices will be necessary for the ritual cleansing of millennial believers who will be living in the very presence of God.81

EZEKIEL AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

By way of summary, the book of Ezekiel is about the glory of the LORD. The glory of the LORD is seen in the transcendence of God, and the holiness and justice of God demand that the glory of the LORD be removed from the defiled temple. However, the glory of the LORD will return to the temple in the time of God’s restoration when the people of Israel will be regathered to the land, reunited as a nation, reborn spiritually, and placed under the authority of a Davidic king and an everlasting covenant of peace. In the New Testament, the book of Ezekiel is only directly quoted one time (Eze 37:27 in 2 Cor 6:16), but the biblical theology in the book of Ezekiel lays the foundation for many of the teachings of the New Testament, especially in the book of Revelation.82


First, the transcendent glory of the God of Israel is displayed in the person of Jesus Christ. Of Him, John writes, “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14; cf. Acts 7:55). The one time during Jesus’ earthly ministry where He displayed the kind of transcendent glory that Ezekiel witnessed was on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-35). Jesus took Peter, James, and John up to a high mountain where He was “transformed” (μετεμορφόθη) before their eyes (17:2). His face shone like the sun, His clothes became as white as light (or whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them [Mark 9:3], as a bright flash of lightning [Luke 9:29]) just like the figure of the man who was surrounded by brilliant light in Ezekiel’s vision (1:28). A cloud enveloped the disciples (cf. Eze 1:4), and a voice from heaven spoke (cf. Eze 1:28). The reaction of the disciples was the same as Ezekiel’s: they fell facedown in terror (Matt 18:6; cf. Eze 1:28; 3:23; 43:3; 44:4). The description of the risen Lord in Revelation 1:12-16 is also similar to the figure in Ezekiel 1:26-28, and John reacts by falling down as though dead (Rev 1:17). What is clear from glory of Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration and in His resurrected, glorified state in Revelation 1 is that Jesus Christ possesses the glory of the LORD as displayed in Ezekiel. This means that Jesus Christ is worthy of the same reverence and worship as the Sovereign LORD in the book of Ezekiel. The glory of Christ also has implications for the doctrine of the incarnation. The thought of diminishing the glory of God would have seemed absurd to the prophet Ezekiel. But in

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His incarnation, the Lord of glory humbled Himself and took on “the appearance of a man” (Phil 2:8), only revealing His truly glorious nature at the Mount of Transfiguration.

Second, the presence no longer resides in temples. Instead, God’s Spirit lives inside of every believer, and the church is the temple God (1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:19-20; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21). What this means for Christians today is that we should live holy lives since we have the very presence of the Sovereign LORD living inside of us. We should not defile the sanctuaries of our bodies with sexual immorality (1 Cor 6:18-20). This would be equivalent to the idolatry that defiled the temple in Ezekiel 8. One important difference is that while the presence of the LORD departed from the temple in Ezekiel’s day, and while the Spirit of the LORD could be removed from believers in the Old Testament (Psa 51:11), Christians today have the promise that God will never leave us nor forsake us (Heb 13:5; Matt 28:20). Additionally, Christians are marked with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the day of redemption (Eph 1:13-14; cf. Eze 9:4, 6; Rev 7:3). Because we have God’s Holy Spirit living in us, then we ought to honor God by living holy lives (1 Pet 1:15; Heb 12:14).

A third point is that individual responsibility, which reflects God’s justice, is a concept which permeates the New Testament. Throughout Jesus’ teaching ministry, He issued calls for people to come to repent and to believe in Him (e.g., Matt 3:2; Luke 13:3; John 3:18). The responsibility still rests upon the individual, just as it did in Ezekiel’s time. This does not mean that we are saved by our works, but each person must respond to the call of the Gospel. Jesus clearly warned, “If you do not believe that I am, then you will die in your sins” (John 8:24). The concept individual responsibility is also taught in Acts 20. In bidding farewell to the Ephesian elders, Paul told them, “Therefore, I declare
to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God” (20:26-27). The responsibility of a church leader to proclaim the entire word of God brings to mind Ezekiel’s commission to be a watchman (Eze 3:17-21; 1-20). A third point is that God still desires the repentance and salvation of all people (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9; cf. Eze 18:23, 32).

Finally, the restoration of God that was proclaimed in Ezekiel’s day still awaits a future fulfillment, even though there are similarities to what God is doing in the church today. In the church, Christians are dispersed around the entire world, but the prophecies of Ezekiel predict a regathering of Jews to the land of Israel in the future. At the moment, the nation of Israel is back in the land, but they have not experienced the spiritual rebirth predicted in Ezekiel 37. The Jewish people do not currently acknowledge the Davidic king (Jesus) who will be their shepherd and prince (Eze 34:23). They are in a state of unbelief until the full number of Gentiles has come in, but they will one day turn to Jesus and be saved (Rom 11:15-27; Zech 12:10). At that time, the Jewish people will also experience the blessings of the everlasting covenant predicted by Ezekiel. Although the church shares in the blessings of the new covenant, the complete fulfillment of Ezekiel’s “covenant of peace” will take place when the nation of Israel receives their Messiah.83

One final point is that Ezekiel’s temple vision is not currently being fulfilled in the church age either. This temple will be constructed after Christ returns to reign on the earth during the millennium.

83 For a discussion of the relationship between Israel, the church, and the new covenant, see R. Bruce Compton, “Dispensationalism, the Church, and the New Covenant,” DBSJ 8 (Fall 2003): 3-48.
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